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## Voices from an Edge: Unsettling the Practices of Youth Voice and Participation. A Case Study from The Blue Room Manchester

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The strengths and limitations of approaches to participatory and democratic practice rooted in voice have been discussed in relation to education and also 'youth voice'. The paper seeks to make critical connection between the two debates, especially in relation to the persistence of practices of exclusion and marginalisation. Drawing on a two-year participant observation of a creativity-based project in Manchester, UK – The Blue Room – which worked with young men in the city centre who may have been engaged in selling sex, the article asks what it might mean for them to have voice. The widely discussed limitations of neoliberal accounts of voice and choice are evident in this case, for the extent to which such a way of life can be thought to be freely chosen is a matter of intense debate. The possibility explored in this article is that arts-based strategies of pedagogic engagement might offer (to this group of young people and others) a hopeful (because complex, provisional and in process) form of voice rather than a tokenistic and controlling one. Keywords: informal; education; youth; voice; arts-based; pedagogy

### Introduction

The strengths and limitations of approaches to participatory and democratic practice rooted in voice have been widely explored and there is a continuing discussion of how exclusion and marginalisation persist in relation to these practices. This article draws on a two-year participant observation of a creativity-based project in Manchester, UK – The Blue Room – which worked with young men in the city centre who may have been engaged in selling sex. This small group of young men who are only just being recognised by research and policy – in a sense – as existing, have had little contact with school and other education institutions. Some have contact with the state care system for looked-after children and have been offered support as 'care leavers'. Most have intermittent contact with the police. What does it mean for them to have voice? The widely discussed limitations of neo-liberal accounts of voice and choice are evident in this case, for the extent to which such a way of life can be thought to be freely chosen is a matter of intense debate. The possibility explored in this article is that arts-based strategies of pedagogic engagement might offer (to this group of young people and others) a hopeful (because complex, provisional and in process) form of voice rather than a tokenistic and controlling one.

The article therefore has a double purpose. Firstly, it offers a perspective on the debates about pupil/student/youth voice exploring the connections and overlaps between them. In particular, it focuses on the problems associated

with inclusivity and marginality in relation to voice, and the issues, ambivalence and dilemmas of what may be involved in constructing the possibility of voice at the edge. Secondly, it presents a case study of arts-based practice which is of great interest in itself but which in this article provides the stimulus for a developing argument about the significance of creativity in developing new democratic pedagogic spaces. In this way the article seeks to connect debates which have developed separately and to propose a practice which recognises the provisionality and multiplicity of voices in processes of transformation.

The Blue Room, Manchester is an informal education project using a range of arts-based methodologies, especially drama and photography. As a project it engages with young men who sell sex or who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the city centre. I conducted an evaluation of The Blue Room between 2008 and 2010 using participant observation and interviews with 10 project participants. In its engagement with young men whose lives are lived often either completely outside of or at best on the very margins of existing systems of support and education, the practice of The Blue Room offers a challenge and a series of provocative questions for more majoritarian forms of pedagogic practice. It also enacts in a week-in, week-out fashion a practice of challenging a silence shaped by social policy and law enforcement strategies which see the young men who use The Blue Room more through the lens of control, especially in relation to petty crime, than through the lens of democratic participation and emancipation.

### **Voice in educational research and 'youth voice'**

The discussion of voice in education research (pupil voice and student voice) has engaged with the opportunities and challenges this offers for a more democratic education, in particular seeking to critique and create alternatives to neo-liberal accounts of 'voice and choice' (Fielding 2004). Alongside this body of writing, there is also a growing literature concerning 'youth research' and the practice of 'youth voice' and 'children and young people's participation' (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). In each case a series of recognisable tensions and problematics have emerged and been charted, suggesting both the possibilities and limitations of initiatives aimed at 'giving voice' for processes of transformation.

Beginning by reviewing the key terms of the debate, this article investigates whether 'youth voice' may be seen as a 'sub-voice' of 'pupil voice' (Arnot and Reay 2007) and what the conditions of existence of 'youth voice' as a pedagogy seem to be. Ideas of pedagogy have a long presence in youth work and community education, at the same time as co-existing with ideas of nurture and support, on the one hand, and citizenship and empowerment, on the other. The example of The Blue Room is used in order to investigate and illuminate creativity-based practice and its capacity to unsettle some of the taken-for-granted dichotomies which shape pedagogic communication and communication about citizenship for young people.

Pupil voice/student voice

Arnot and Reay (2007), drawing productively on the work of Bernstein,

have challenged the assumption that voices can be captured outside the power relations which produce them. They have argued that the apparent democratic promise of 'voice' is consistently undermined by a failure to pay proper analytic attention to the codes of communication which structure that voice. A similar argument can be made in relation to the practice of consultations with young people which have emerged strongly under the influence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 enshrined the requirement that 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Enacted in the first instance especially in relation to judicial processes and with special importance for 'looked after children', the acceptance of this convention contributed to the development of a proliferation of initiatives emphasising young people's voice and participation across a range of sites. It is widely argued that this not only enhances citizenship learning but also contributes to the building up of social and cultural capital, which can mitigate the effects of a lack of economic capital (Coburn 2011).

Arnot and Reay (2007) have argued that it is essential to construct a sociology of pedagogic voice, understanding the specific impact of the classroom codes which construct such voice. They have suggested that codes of classroom talk and subject talk tend to marginalise identity talk which is not legitimated in the context of 'pupil voice'. Rather, identity talk is, they suggest, seen and legitimated as occurring outside school and often in the context of 'youth research':

Teachers could (with difficulty) elicit or work with such voice (e.g. girls talk or projects on masculinity). However usually such talk is gathered through deep ethnographic research. Identity talk is created outside school but is drawn in or reconceptualised in complex ways inside the school. (Arnot and Reay 2007, 319)

This is certainly exemplified within the practice of The Blue Room, for most participants have been outside of the formal education system for some years and in seeking to re-engage with it they may need to silence key stigmatised aspects of their identity. The power relations embedded in the codes of communication insist that such identity-talk cannot be voiced within the acoustic of the school. It is therefore unsurprising that such talk is expected to be voiced and amplified within youth work and in youth participation practices which occur in the context of informal education outside of the school. However, the issue of the construction of pedagogic voices and the assumed identities offered in such out-of-school contexts must also be explored.

#### Youth voice

It has therefore become a commonplace suggestion that youth work and informal education are able to engage and work with those on the margins of school or excluded from the school system. Arnot and Reay's (2007) analysis might suggest that this is a direct consequence of pedagogic codes which position and classify identity-talk within a discourse of 'youth' occurring outside of school. So, although talk about identity is indeed legitimated here in a way it may not be in schools, it is important to recognise the pedagogic

processes at work here too which may in fact reinforce marginality and exclusion. Does the demand for student voice 'welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin?' (Cook-Sather 2007, 394).

This challenging question needs to be asked not only in schools but in the out-of-school contexts in which 'youth voice' is constructed. Even in this space outside of school there are 'pedagogic codes' associated not only with 'youth researchers' but with the professional practice of youth workers, youth participation workers, personal advisers, counsellors, advocacy project workers, community workers and so on. In these professional spaces, 'identity' is not marginalised but provoked, and yet this occurs often through codes associated with discourses of 'youth', each of which is readily polarised.

These can be said to include:

- \_ A discourse of the body, sex and 'adolescent development': early sexual relationships versus pregnancy/delayed marriage and child birth.
- \_ A discourse of growing autonomy and individual agency: children to be protected versus already-adult status.
- \_ A discourse of negotiating scales of expectation and what counts as symbolic or cultural capital: 'citizenship values' or 'acts of community service' versus five GCSEs grades A–C.
- \_ A discourse of the 'youth divide': those who are 'on track' versus those who are 'at risk'.
- \_ A discourse of crime and disorder, of good versus bad young people: young volunteers versus feral youth (Ryan 2007; White and Wynn 2008; Jeffs and Smith 1999).

In the case of *The Blue Room*, for example, it is all too easy to construct a voice and narratives which focus on dysfunctional families, on sexual abuse and risk in ways which construct the participants in the project as victims and remove them from agency (Polkinghorne 1996).

Just as the sociology of school-based pedagogies needs to analyse the impact of communicative codes, so the analysis of 'youth voice' needs to recognise how the discourses or codes of youth are shaping participation practice and delineating what can and cannot be spoken. Several analyses have demonstrated how the homogenising of 'youth' which writes out power and salient social divisions such as gender, 'race', class and disability produces a discourse of riskiness or trouble. This discourse offers powerful codes of communication which shape what will count as 'voice'. Groups such as looked-after children and carers, travellers, young people with learning disabilities, Black and Minority Ethnic young people, refugees and asylum seekers, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people are referred to in a UK policy context as 'marginalised'. Engaging such groups in 'youth participation' may depend largely on accessing such young people through existing services and then treating them as 'the representatives' (Podd 2010). Paradoxically, inviting young people to speak, especially those who have been marginalised by school, can in some ways intensify that marginality. Rather than continuing to invoke 'identity' in such processes, the work of a critical pedagogy therefore might seek to unsettle such invited identifications and to open out to the provisional and in process nature of all assumed identities.

The discourses of youth makes identity-speaking possible without any risk of decentring the school or the systems of classification which schools enact. Over and over again, 'youth' are encouraged to speak but the critical question that is often posed is the question of who is listening and how these voices might be amplified into a wider culture and with access to real symbolic capital. Young people may be empowered, but to what end? The practice of 'listening to young people' is now built in to many actions of government departments and children and young people's Trusts in the UK and globally, and young people are encouraged to participate especially through youth forums, youth councils, through the offices of Young Mayors and the Youth Parliament, as trustees of charities, as members of youth panels deciding the allocation of resources to other young people's projects (Cockburn 2010). However when young people mobilise politically outside these spaces – such as in the UK campaign against the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, linked to a broader anti-cuts campaign or even in street-fighting with the nationalist English Defence League – they are likely to be seen as naive, off the rails or troublemakers.

What I am arguing is that the emergence of identity-based sub-voices from outside school does not mean that these voices escape pedagogic codes or classification systems. In particular, the voices of 'youth' are codified through the practices of forums/parliaments; through 'Identity', particularly through practices which seek to include 'excluded groups'; and through practices of safeguarding which enable the strong presence of looked-after young people and young people with special educational needs in this space. It is therefore likely (and in fact the case) that communications within these spaces which conform to the codes of 'youth' outlined earlier can be heard, whilst other voices cannot. The UK Youth Parliament's campaign on Sex and Relationships Education led to a change to make such education compulsory in the curriculum. Other issues, such as the importance of parks and public spaces to young people, which regularly emerge as important at local level, are less likely to emerge as are issues which are non-consensual. Above all, what seems hard to challenge and make visible is the system of classification and legitimation at work in these practices of youth voice: quasi-governmental committee processes as against direct action; representation as against collective action. As it is these classification structures which afford access to symbolic capital, it may be argued that in not challenging these classifications a form of symbolic violence is performed against all those such as members of The Blue Room who do not access such approved forms of participation.

All of this suggests that the claims about the access through youth work and other youth participation initiatives to forms of cultural capital should be treated with some ambivalence. Yet – insofar as they do open up and construct spaces for voice outside the teaching machine – youth work as informal education may be thought of as a border pedagogy, a place of skirmishes as well as bridge building in a system where symbolic violence is practised consistently against those at the bottom of the classification ladder through the communication codes of 'youth' (Giroux 2005, 2010). Such skirmishes may involve the sense that participation in provided 'youth spaces' changes very little and at worst leads to a deeper disaffection. This is in contrast with the sense, most often expressed by successful participants

in such structures and their adult supporters, that the conduct of youth councils and parliaments is far superior to their adult counterparts. The mature young people, those with growing autonomy, successfully take part and manage (sometimes as student youth workers or social workers) the 'feral youth' on the other side of 'the youth divide' (Jones 2002). However, it is possible to displace these structuring divides at least at the level of a project, even whilst they remain powerful frameworks for policy. The next part of this article investigates the ways in which pedagogies of voice in arts-based informal education can unsettle some of these dichotomies of youth policy discourse and practice.

Some of the questions that have been raised in the discussions of 'voice' as a contributing force to the renewal of democracy have included an investigation of the interpretation of meanings and the processes of translation; the nature of the dialogue between adults and young people which occurs; the tendency to re-inscribe passivity in young people when they are disappointed in the lack of outcome from the experience of raising their voices; the nature of spaces in which young people and adults with authority can meet together as equals; and the energy that emerges from creative disagreement. If symbolic capital is lacking for many youth voice projects, can engagement with the arts and with processes of symbolisation begin to challenge this and lay the grounds for democratic practice which can open up symbolic power? These are the issues to be explored further in relation to arts-based practice, using material from The Blue Room evaluation, in particular a play, *The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie*, and a city-wide conference, 'Down Not Out'.

### **Arts-based practice: the freeze-frame, the story-board and the interior monologue**

One way of explaining why The Blue Room project started from a different place from the mainstream of youth participation work was that its initial funding did not come from either the Children's Trust or from the Department of Health, nor even from the Community Safety budget but from North West Arts and then from Comic Relief, that is from arts or charitable sources. In contrast with an approach to safety and risk which seeks to minimise risk (the dominant tone in Children's Services), the much-praised McMaster report, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* (2008), recognised the significance of risk-taking to any form of excellence. 'The desire and ability to innovate and the willingness to take risks is fundamental for any organisation striving to be excellent . . . It is vital that young people are given the chance to experience culture within and outside school and that this experience is excellent' (McMaster 2008, 10).

In this discourse, excellence and community-based pedagogies and artistic practice are not seen as in conflict, as they usually are in discussions of elitism in culture. The Blue Room emerged as a project in a moment in the UK of recognition of the significance of creativity and artistic practice to all young people: the moment of the 'culture offer' and Creative Partnerships. However, the fact that this programme was managed through schools led to a level of exclusion to which many non-school-based creative practitioners sought to respond. Graeme Urlwin set up The Blue Room as part of a long engagement with issues facing vulnerable young men, which he had first

been made aware of through his work with The Albert Kennedy Trust, a then Manchester-based agency named after a young man who died falling from the roof in Chorlton Street Car Park in what has now become 'Manchester's Gay Village'. Albert Kennedy had run away from a care home and (some people believe) had become involved in 'renting' or selling sex before his death. Since then Manchester has seen the transformation of the space occupied by the gay community in the life of the city and the development of a number of 'civil society' organisations which are now well established and contribute to development of the cultural life of the city, particularly through Pride, the festival which occurs annually in August celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, as well as to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender perspectives in the development of public services.

The Blue Room has worked regularly with about 20 young men on a cycle of creative projects based in photography, music, drama, silkscreen printing, animation, and film-making. It is now part of a new organisation, The Men's Room, and offers a creativity-based approach to work with vulnerable young men.

The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie was performed to an invited audience of professionals at the Green Room Theatre, Manchester after a period of workshopping between April and September 2008. The 'Down Not Out' conference in July 2009 was the culmination of a three-year period of working in partnership with the Homelessness and Dual Diagnosis Teams and was a creativity-led event for professionals and service users from across the city. Blue Room members worked with actors from The Big Life Company (a project working with adult homeless people) to lead the event. Both The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie and Down Not Out were devised theatre, working with professional actors and led by Kate McCoy, the Blue Room Artistic Director, in dialogue with the Blue Room members.

In what follows I do not intend to present a full account of either of these events. Rather the intention is to draw out some key features of creative practice as practices of voice, translation and dialogue and to discuss the extent to which this allows some 'thinking otherwise' than the prevailing models of voice.

### **Aspects of arts-based practice**

The mediations of voice and expression provided by engagement with the arts and creativity mean that it is possible to enable a range of dialogues, a series of translations, a recognition of complexity and a linking of the here-and-now to the imagination of possible futures rather than referring to 'findings' of consultations, the 'products of past performance'. This is achieved by at least the following means.

Firstly, the use of symbolisations. In The Blue Room (interestingly in terms of a youth discourse legitimising the speaking about sex and bodies) this included regular production of highly sexualised symbolisation. Nevertheless in the workshopping of the play The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie

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there was no depiction of sex work by either of the boys until almost the end of the project; the hopeless mother in the story was however depicted as having a lot of boyfriends in and out of her life from almost the beginning of the workshop process. Similarly, the character of Barney in Down Not Out was not depicted as involved in the sex trade. Symbolisation



enables participants to determine what is and is not of importance and to give power where they see it as important. This is immensely significant in terms of the control of agendas.

Secondly, arts-based practice requires expression of feelings. In The Blue Room this involved complicated mixed feelings and ambivalence: shame/pride; nothingness/hope; hurt/love. 'Love hearts' featured often in drawings made during the period of preparing The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie. These love hearts and accompanying poems formed the backdrop for the 'Down Not Out' conference. 'Don't care' (said with passionate engagement) and then 'I've been given a new life' one of the boys said, during an evaluation session. Voice can be more than merely rational: its meanings contradictory, ambivalent, multiple, neither one thing nor another.

Thirdly, arts-based practice can enable the exploration of the meaning of experiences, offering provisionality in the interpretation of them and a helpful distance from 'ownership': 'this may or may not be me I am talking about'. 'I think too much and sink', as the words of one of the poems made into a poster and used in performance said. Drama exercises such as freeze-frames mean people can try out perspectives, opinions, versions of a story without necessarily identifying themselves with any one version. In The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie, life events became part of a story-board, a fictional narrative. When the story-board suggested that the father dies, someone could say 'He might have had a heart attack' and someone else could say 'He might have committed suicide'. In the final version of the story, as it was performed to an audience of professionals, the fact that the father committed suicide was a family secret, disguised from the outside world; their mother insisting that everyone is told he has had a heart attack. When the actor portrays the two brothers as having had a quarrel, the boys can immediately suggest reasons: 'His brother might have been robbing from him'.

Within this exploration of meanings and trying things out new skills and new ideas can emerge from 'I can't write', 'I can't act', 'I can't draw' to 'I feel so good about this'. Sometimes particular drawing or drama exercises prompt a reflection at either a superficial or deeper level, with the choice left with the participant. For example, a drama exercise using a physical stance 'behind, beside, ahead' and making a frozen statue leads to discussion of 'What's behind you? What's with you now? What's ahead of you?' The Stories project from which The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie emerged allowed the use of a time-line, creating reflection on the past and imagination of possible futures. One boy, during the workshop period, depicted a sex scene.

'I made love to my girlfriend', he said proudly, with words he was clearly unaccustomed to using. 'Maybe it's normal to make love.'

Fourthly, there is a commitment to risk-taking/safe space. Arts practitioners are committed to risk-taking as a source of creativity and they take risks, especially in making commitments to significant public events and performances. Paradoxically this risk-taking by the artists and staff leads to the creation of safe space and therefore the possibility of risk-taking in naming and exploring experiences and their meanings. There is a profound level of acceptance at work. Judgement is mediated through the arts practice and reframed as questioning and learning. This gives everyone freedom and a sense that something which usually remains hidden and unexplored can be spoken about.

Fifthly, the arts and creativity-based work give permission to play, be silly, be free like a child. Using timelines reminded many of the boys of places they had played out as children, parks and fields remembered with affection. It also meant that when the participants take on a 'child' persona, staff may offer a caring rather than a neglectful, abandoning or cruel response. Connected to the permission to play is the nurturing of imagination: another life is possible. Many of the young men have expressed their surprise that they have discovered new skills through the project. All these processes are facilitated and negotiated by skilled creative practitioners and informal educators. The 'voice' of the young men is still constructed within power relations between adults and young people, between staff and members, visiting artists and Blue Room members. For most of the time, the voices which emerge through such artistic practice are of the moment, belonging to a pedagogy of the here-and-now. But the codes of communication implicit in this practice as an artistic practice of symbolisation open up a wider range of communicative possibilities including those of advocacy, recognition and compassionate witnessing. It is when the work of the project moves into public performance that these wider possibilities emerge and the practice can be said to enter the space of democratic empowerment and potentially to engage with a struggle over symbolic capital.

### **Voices in the public domain: public performance and pedagogies of voice**

The issue of advocacy/recognition through engagement in the public domain is a testing one for a project engaged with supporting young men engaged in what is constructed as a deeply shameful activity. In this extract from research notes, in a discussion of the issue of the invisibility of sex work and the possibilities for future work including public representations of sex work, Jack and Pete hold two poles of the debate:

Jack: Make it more visible. It's about time we had a voice. People have treated us like rats, like dirt but we're doing a job and people should know about it.

Pete: People look on us like dirt.

Jack: People shouldn't look on us like dirt. It's powerful for our community. Maybe you should exhibit something else that is about sex work. We're doing a job and, think about it, if it wasn't for us there'd be more rape.

There is a tension here between two positions, one of which supports public representation of sex work and the other which fears a response of being treated like dirt and so rejects it. Both are held by the boys and also by the staff and of course more widely in the culture and have to be negotiated every time The Blue Room engages in a public event. Thus The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie and Down Not Out challenged invisibility and created a wider public awareness. But the sense that 'we are dirt' and that 'people look on us like shit' can also be reinforced in the public presentation of the work.

It is at this point that the argument needs to return to the issues of classification and access or lack of access to symbolic capital discussed earlier in the analyses of 'voice'. If being seen 'like rats, like dirt' is an indication of the symbolic violence these young people have endured, the symbolisation of their lives through devised theatre is all the more potent. If, however, these symbolisations are not received or heard in a context of dialogue then many of the issues of democracy and voice discussed earlier remain, even

in a practice which appears to subvert them. On the whole, young men feel empowered by their involvement in 'The Blue Room': the words that occur most frequently, when they are asked what they think and feel about their involvement in The Blue Room, alongside 'dunno' and 'don't care' are 'memorable', 'exciting' and 'PROUD'. The project offers possible new identities from 'scum' and 'shit' to 'artist, volunteer and 'helper' of other boys. 'I know what their lives are like and I want to help these other boys get out of it. Learn a skill. Do something with their lives.' But whether the personal empowerment leads to positional shifts or democratic change is less certain. The challenge to the dominant codes of classification, conversation and dialogue needs to happen explicitly and to seek amplification in the wider culture. In the final section of this article I will explore one attempt to make those codes visible and to challenge them. The necessity of such a challenge is made clear by the way existing classifications position the young men who are members of The Blue Room.

### **Challenging the classification system? The spaces of arts-based informal education**

What does it mean to 'take part in' or 'to be part of' a whole in which you are consistently subject to symbolic violence by virtue of the identities on offer, as members of The Blue Room are? In this context, a democratic pedagogic practice needs to open up the fluidity of identifications rather than depict the static and unchanging presence of 'members of underrepresented groups'.

'Participation' can be said to work for the already-positioned in the mainstream but not for those whose lives are lived on an edge. Even in the very moment that participation projects engage with people at the edge, by accepting the positionings on offer as 'engaging the disaffected', 'reaching the hard to reach and chaotic', they work for the already 'mainstream'. Artsbased methods may offer new ways of participating in knowledge creation by virtue of shifting identities, opening up rather than solidifying them: in this case not only 'sex worker' or 'rent-boy' but 'artist', 'actor', 'photographer'. Arts-based creative approaches are a means of challenging more rationalist, instrumentalist versions of voice and participation. They can draw attention to these questions of what is involved in the framing and shaping of knowledge. The engagement with a theatre space for The Tale of Charlie and Ronnie changed the relationship between the knowers and the known as a conference for professionals was initiated and shaped by those more usually known as 'clients'. This conference became 'Down Not Out' and emerged from the earlier devised theatre project.

Artistic performance can throw into relief routinised practices and constructions of voice. For example, the performance of participation and voice has become both routinised and banal in some aspects of youth work, yet in The Blue Room example, it has a 'one-off' quality. Arts-based methods can return emotion to voice whether this is conceived as happening through 'the location of emotion in both bodies and places, the emotional relationality of people and environments, and representations of emotional geographies' (Bondi, Davidson, and Smith 2005, 3) or through 'making, alliance and forms of representation' which challenge and change sexual and social relations towards social justice (O'Neill 2002, 3). The movement of emotion in newly emerging voices is connected with the emergence of new kinds of

spaces. These enable a different relationship than those of established hierarchies of social and symbolic power and out of that different relationship change emerges.

For The Blue Room, the spaces of informal education, of evaluation and research and of public performance were large (non-domestic) city centre spaces as well as a small barber's shop in the gay village and in the streets around the city centre. These spaces included a large church space used by the King's Church, a largely African church, and the Nexus Arts Cafe which is run by a group of young Christians in a basement of the Central Methodist Church; warehouse-type spaces; and a small theatre space. They are not offices or clinics or classrooms nor are they the prisons where much applied arts performance takes place. They are places where the young men can claim some sense of belonging or at least some share in as distinct from places which are 'owned by the council' or 'the education system'. This enables a 'mutual recognition' among all involved: the young men, the arts practitioners, the informal educators.

This 'mutual recognition' involves all participants in taking risks and this openness to risk supports the building up of trust. Trust then makes possible exploration and investigation of moments and relations in the living of vulnerable lives, including relations with the authorities, as well as an openness on the part of educators and creative practitioners to exploring their role and relinquishing their absolute control of agendas, whether creative or social. 'Mutual recognition' requires the recognition of many layers of accounts and representation. Whilst we postmoderns dispute the real and seek the ghost in the machine, the boys who use The Blue Room say that rather than 'having to live like a ghost' (which is how they live their lives on the street), being involved in this work 'makes them feel part of real life'. 'Keeping it real' begins to seem imperative.

During the 'Down Not Out' conference I attempted to investigate the relationship between professionals and the boys through a scripted performance, and the following is an extract from it:

I want to spend time now talking about some challenges that face us. One of the biggest is a kind of phoney dialogue set up by public bodies who want to 'engage the hard to reach' and ask them questions which public bodies need the answer to:

Public bodies who see people like this:

'due to a frequently chaotic lifestyle . . . the majority of clients have substance abuse problems and engage in begging to support this . . . as a result they have difficulty sustaining commitments, keeping appointments, lack of confidence in services, difficulties in accessing services due to a history of antisocial behaviour or offending.'

The problems of engagement are usually seen this way. The clients are 'hard to reach' because their lives have made them so. But what if services are 'hard to reach' because the lives of the people who make them up have made them so. . .

I decided – in the spirit of The Blue Room and the Down Not Out event – to ask the young men what questions they would ask of workers if they got the chance, and here is what they came up with:

How much do you get paid?

Why do you do your job?

Why is it so difficult to get help sometimes?

Why don't workers try to influence policy/try to change things more?

Why do I have to stay in a hostel (which is a negative environment with drink

and drugs) in order to get to the bottom of the housing ladder?  
Why are you wasting my time?

Instead of the approved questions generated by the consultations and focus groups so beloved in the neo-liberal policy tool-kit, these non-approved questions brought the exchange and performance to life. The event closed with a piece of performance poetry based on a reading of current professional jargon and worked out with the members of The Blue Room. This performance, in which professional jargon was drowned out by an increasingly angry group of clients, The Blue Room and Big Life Company performers challenged and made visible the classification system which awards the right to ask questions and set agendas to one section of society (the experts) and calls on the others (the clients) to form focus groups.

## **Conclusion**

The example of The Blue Room suggests that arts-based practice is an alternative methodology to those more usually proposed through practices of pupil/student/youth voice.

The use of codes of communication embedded in creative practice are seen to enable a more explicit engagement with power and with the complexity and ambiguity of emerging voices – the voices yet to be heard and the sub-voices exploring identity – than either the classroom or subject talk which dominates the codes of school or the discourses of pathology and risk/active citizenship which create the codes of youth participation. This happens through an opening up to the non-rational and provisional rather than through the creation of stability through the imposition of identities such as ‘Member of Youth Parliament’, ‘Young Inspector’ and such like. The emphasis on recognising and working with a multiplicity of meanings and the role of the creative practitioner as co-creator of meanings leads to a real process of collaboration and dialogue. The use of the city centre itself and some of its more marginal venues as a stage or performance space means that the space of public performance is jointly owned and negotiated rather than provided for the young people on adult terms. Performance links voice to agency: literally, the actor speaks, the photographer shows. It also links the future back to the here and now: whereas young people are seen in public policy as a work-in-progress, a project of reform, arts-based practice values and gives value to life in the here and now.

When it is argued – as it often is – that the practices of youth work can create social and cultural capital, this very often neglects analysis of the system of classification that ranks and values symbolic power and this then impacts on those who lack symbolic power with symbolic violence. Educational practices which engage in the project of democratising education and see ‘voice’ as a way into this should be concerned with practices of symbolisation and communication and with analysis of their own conditions of existence.

There is a particular challenge for democratic practice when it occurs at an edge associated with abjection. The use of the language of ‘scum’, ‘dirt’, ‘rats’ and so on in relation to the people educators are engaging should alert us to processes of abjection which are widely recognisable. The moment of naming of these classification codes which position participants in a place almost outside and yet not quite totally excluded may be a moment which proposes a larger social transformation. It needs careful attention in any

sociology of pedagogic voice, which must be concerned with the codes of voice not only within but outside of schooling. During the production Down Not Out Iranian demonstrators for democracy were marching with the slogan 'We are not dust and dirt' and the performance and alliance between Blue Room members and the youth workers who we might call the pedagogues or street educators engaged in the project made that translation possible.

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